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ABSTRACT

A discussion of foreign language immersion instruction in elementary schools begins with a definition of immersion instruction and its goals. The history of the establishment of such programs in the United States and Canada is briefly described. A variety of program options available within the immersion approach are outlined, including early total, early partial, middle or delayed, and late immersion programs. Immersion program results are reviewed through recent research findings, including the effects on English skills, second language skills, and learning of subject material, as well as findings on the relationship of achievement in immersion programs to IQ and learning disabilities. Differences in program results related to program type (partial or total, late or early) are noted. The spread of immersion instruction in United States school districts is chronicled, and Milwaukee's program efforts and results are described. Finally, theoretical foundations of immersion methodology and links to other foreign language instructional approaches are examined. It is concluded that while there is great variety in the types of immersion programs currently functioning, and there are still areas needing further investigation, the approach is a sound one, contributing to both foreign language and native language skills. A list of references is appended. (MSE)

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PRINCIPLE AND PRACTICE

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THE IMMERSION APPROACH: PRINCIPLE AND PRACTICE

The immersion approach to second language instruction at the elementary level has received much attention recently because it holds the promise of achieving a goal which elementary second language programs have been unable to accomplish in the past -- functional proficiency in the second language. That is, that students who go through the entire sequence of an elementary immersion program are able to communicate in the second language on topics appropriate to their age level. In addition to the goal of functional proficiency in the second language, immersion programs have as a further goal, the mastery of subject content material which is taught through the second language.

The focus of this paper is the definition of what an immersion program is, and a description of how it functions. Included in this paper are the goals of immersion programs, and the various types of program options: early, middle, late, total and partial. Also included is a discussion about achievement in immersion programs and the advantages of early immersion over some of the other models. There is a discussion of immersion programs in the United States context with a special look at the Milwaukee context. Lastly, there is a brief discussion about the theoretical foundations of the immersion approach, with an attempt to establish some links between immersion and other kinds of approaches.

Definition of Immersion

Language immersion means a program in which the usual curriculum activities are conducted in a second language which is the medium of instruction rather than the object of instruction. An immersion program can begin at any level -- at the beginning of elementary school, in kindergarten or grade one, where it is called early immersion, or it can begin toward the end of elementary school in grades four or five, where it is called middle or delayed immersion. It can also begin somewhere at the secondary level, in middle school/junior high, or high school where it is called late immersion. There are variables in immersion programs as to the amount of time each day spent in the second language. In total immersion programs the second language is used for the entire school day during the first two or three years of the program. In partial immersion programs, instruction takes place in the second language for part (at least half) of the school day. Of all models and approaches to second language acquisition, the immersion approach, by the nature of its design, is able to very easily integrate language study into the pattern of the normal school curriculum.

The common goals of immersion programs may be stated as follows: (for example, Lambert and Tucker, 1972; Campbell, 1984; Swain, 1984).

1. Students will achieve functional proficiency in the second language.
2. Students will maintain and continue to develop skills in their first language.
3. Students will master subject content at their appropriate grade level.
4. Students will acquire an understanding and appreciation of another language and culture which will in no way detract from their appreciation of their home culture.

Establishment of Public School Immersion Programs

The idea of putting language learners in the environment where they must use the language is certainly not a new one. This is something which has happened throughout history. The first public school immersion program in recent times, began in 1965 with a kindergarten in St. Lambert in the province of Quebec. It was prompted by a group of English speaking parents who were concerned that traditional French programs were not sufficient to meet their children's needs for greater comprehension and fluency in French at a time when bilingualism in French and English had become an important necessity in Canada. Immersion programs have grown in Canada so that they are now offered in every province with approximately 100,000 students enrolled in French programs. Immersion programs have spread to the United States where, according to Rhodes and Schreibstein (1983), there are now about 5,000 students enrolled in French, German and Spanish programs.

Early Total Immersion

In the next section of this paper, the different program options that can be found within the immersion approach will be discussed. In early total immersion programs students begin their study of the second language in kindergarten or first grade. Early total immersion programs take advantage of children's language acquisition in a natural setting where the new language is the only means of communication. From the minute the children arrive at school in the morning, they hear only the second language from the teacher. All classroom conversation and instructions are in the second language. In this way the children acquire the second language in play and work situations that are related to meaningful communication. The emphasis is on the learning activity (reading, mathematics, social studies, art etc.) not the language.

Students enrolled in the program are monolingual English-speaking children. Teachers are native or near-native speakers of the second language. Since all of the students in an immersion class are monolingual, they begin on an equal footing with each other with regard to second language skills. The children tend to show little anxiety or frustration about learning in another language because the things they learn are within their experience, and because every effort is made to put messages into a meaningful context. For example, they learn to speak and write about things they understand: in kindergarten a lesson on objects that sink and float, in first grade a trip to the fire station, in second grade a lesson on magnets, in sixth grade a lesson on Wisconsin History and so forth.

In the immersion classroom the students initially communicate with each other in English. They also use English to communicate with the teacher who will respond to them in the second language. This reduces anxiety and allows them a silent period where they can begin to build up their comprehension. Within a year and a half to two years in the program, the students move rather automatically into speech production. When reading skills are introduced, it is done through the second language. This is markedly different from most bilingual education programs where reading is always introduced in the first language. After two or three years in a total immersion program, formal English Language Arts is introduced for thirty minutes to an hour each day in the second or third grade. As the students progress through the middle grades, the amount of English is gradually increased until in grades five or six, there is a balance of both the second language and English. It is often the case that slight variations in program design occur depending upon the needs, desires and resources of an individual school district, but the basic concept, goals, and methodology of the immersion approach remain the same.

Early Partial Immersion Programs

The difference between early partial immersion programs and total immersion programs is that in early partial immersion only 50% of the instruction is in the second language. Students learn to read in both languages at the same time from first grade on. In partial immersion programs, the amount of second language instruction usually remains constant throughout the elementary school program. Some school administrators have opted for a partial rather than a total immersion program due to cost factors, scheduling factors, or the fear often held by parents, that students in total immersion programs would be lacking in native language skills.

Middle or Delayed Immersion Programs

In middle or delayed immersion programs, the use of the second language as a major medium of instruction is delayed until grades four or five. Students often have a traditional-type second language course in the primary grades before they enter the delayed immersion program. (Genesee, 1984)

Late Immersion Programs

Late immersion programs are those that begin anywhere at the end of elementary school or the beginning of middle school or high school. Many of the students entering late immersion programs have had previous traditional-type instruction in the second language. In many cases the students are taught a class in language arts in the second language along with at least two subject content areas. Genesee (1984) has defined late immersion programs as programs where at least half the school day is spent in the second language and in which at least two subject content areas are taught through the second language.

Immersion Program Results

Fear that students will not achieve well in the basic and will fall behind the traditional English-only classes has been the concern of teachers and administrators in both Canadian and American School districts. In research coming from immersion programs in Canada, study after study, and year after year, the positive effects of the immersion approach have been well-described and well-documented since the original St. Lambert study. (Lambert and Tucker, 1972) Students acquire remarkable proficiency in the second language as compared to students in traditional second language programs. They also show equal or superior performance to their monolingual English-speaking peers in measures of subject-content mastery in mathematics, science and social studies. It is interesting to note that the tests of cognitive abilities and subject content achievement were administered in English even though the students were being taught through the second language. Results from research show that immersion students "develop more friendly and open attitudes toward French-Canadians." (Lambert, 1984) Also discussed are other positive benefits of immersion and the effectiveness of immersion education for children with below average IQ or with language learning disabilities.

Effects on English Skills

Research results (Swain 1979, 1981, 1984) show that students in early immersion programs perform as well as or often out-perform, their English-educated peers on tests of achievement in English. Immersion students are initially behind in their English skills but catch up within a year after the English component is introduced into the curriculum. Students develop literacy skills in the second language, which

are transferred to the first language. One exception to the initial poorer performance of the immersion students before the formal introduction of English is that they were found to be more sensitive to the needs of the listener in their oral communication skills. (Genesee, Lambert and Tucker, 1975)

Effects on Second Language Skills

Swain (1979) has described the effects of immersion programs on the second language skills of students:

> The results reveal consistently superior performance in French skills as compare l to sutdents who have had a traditional program of French instruction. The results also show that the immersion students score as well on French proficiency instruments as 30% of the native-speaking students. After six or seven years in an immersion program, student performance in the areas of listening and reading approaches native-like levels; whereas in the areas of speaking and writing, many differences between immersion and Francophone students still remain.

Even though the children in immersion programs develop a functional proficiency far beyond anything that can be accomplished in a traditional-type foreign language program, and become functionally bilingual and literate in two languages, their second language skills are not native-like with respect to all characteristics of vocabulary and grammar. Swain (1981) summarized the distinction: "This does not mean that the children were unable to say what they wanted to, but they used numerous strategies or techniques to say what they did not have the grammatical means to say."

Another look at the second language skills of children in early immersion programs comes from the Spanish program in Culver City, California. (Campbell, 1984)

> There appears to be a minimum of the kind of social pressure or the amount of overt correction teachers that might motivate the students to modify their production toward the native-speaker norm. Apparently the Spanish immersion students typically reach a level of linguistic competence adequate for the next step toward native-like linguistic competence, but they are unlikely to do so until there are reasonable, powerful motives to do so.
>
> It must be reiterated, however, that, while the children's speech is typically accented, the children produce a very high percentage of linguistic forms required in any given utterance in adherence to the linguistic rules of Spanish. In fact, the students' degree of grammaticality, that is, the correct selection of lexical and grammatical forms and the correct pronunciation in the production and comprehension of Spanish utterances, far exceeds the degree of ungrammaticality.

Some of the reasons to account for the difference between the speech of the immersion students and their native-speaking peers may be explained by the lack of interaction among immersion students and native speakers and the fact that the only native-speaker model that the students have available to them is their classroom teacher. Otherwise the only spoken second language they hear is that of their non-native-speaking classmates. This implies that further development of their second language skills is dependent on interaction with native speakers of the language, either in or out of school. If the immersion students were put in a situation where they were given a need to modify their language, these children should be able to move quickly and efficiently toward more native-like speech. Another point to consider is the amount of contact hours a native speaker would have with the language by the end of the sixth grade and the number of contact hours that are possible in an immersion program.

Effects on the Learning of Subject Content Material

Immersion students do very well in academic achievement in science, mathematics and social studies and have over the years, consistently demonstrated comparable or better performance than students who are taught in an English-only program. (Swain, 1984)

Achievement in Immersion Programs as Related to IQ and Learning Disabilities

A view held by many is that immersion education is only for children of above average intelligence. If this were true, it would be expected that above average students would have higher scores in tests of second language proficiency than below average students, given the usual relationship between IQ and academic achievement. On tests of literacy related skills (Swain, 1975; Genesee, 1976) the above average students found that above or below average IQ made no difference at all in their performance of interpersonal communication skills. The below average students understood as much spoken French as did the above average students, and they were rated as highly as the above average students on all measures of oral production.

These studies suggest that IQ does not play a more significant role in the success of a student in immersion that it does in the success of a student in the regular monolingual program. According to Swain (1975): "Thus, although there will be a difference in performance among students, the below average IQ students are not at any more of a disadvantage in an immersion program than they would be if they were in a regular English program, plus they have an equal opportunity of learning second language communicative skills."

Basically the same conclusion has been reached concerning children with language learning disabilities. It has been found that children with language learning disabilities who have followed the traditional French as a Second Language program, acquire little knowledge of French because the nature of the teaching method seems to exploit the areas where they have difficulty -- "memory work, repetition of language out of context; explicit teaching of abstract rules." (Bruck, 1978) Therefore, if language learning disabled children are to acquire a second language in school, immersion appears to be a much better context in which they can achieve this goal.

Differences Between Partial and Total Immersion Programs

When looking at the differences between partial and total immersion programs, the results are somewhat as expected, the more contact hours that are involved, the better the second language proficiency of the students. In studies of French language skills (Swain, 1979) it has been found that partial immersion students do not perform as well as total immersion students of the same grade level, but they tend to perform as well as total immersion students in lower grade levels who have had similar amounts of contact time with French. In the learning of content materials, early partial immersion students tend to perform equivalently or not as well as their English educated peer groups. One explanation for this may lie in Cummins' (1976) threshold hypothesis which states that learners must attain a "threshold" level in their second language in order to be able to benefit from instruction in that language. It is not known at this time, just what that threshold level is. This is certainly an area for further research.

Results From Late Immersion Programs

The outcomes from late immersion programs with respect to subject content mastery, maintenance of first language skills and development of second language skills are difficult to summarize because of the large variation in formats which are available. Swain (1979) states that if there is sufficient core French instruction prior to the program and if sufficient additional courses are taken in French following the program, high levels of French proficiency, with no loss to the mastery of content material or native language proficiency, can be attained.

Benefits of Early Immersion

One of the most obvious benefits to early immersion education is the long sequence of time which it allows for the student to achieve proficiency in the second language, and the fact that it prepares the students to survive communicatively in a native-speaking environment with the expectation that the student's speech will become more and more native-like. Early immersion makes bilingualism possible for the largest number of students because functional proficiency in the second language at that level is not necessarily tied to literacy skills.

Since early immersion develops proficiency in the second language very quickly, it is possible for the children to acquire the fluency needed to deal with subject content areas without any difficulty. This is not the case in partial or late immersion programs where the level of vocabulary required in a subject content course may be beyond the language ability of the students. In early immersion, much less time is required than is required in partial immersion programs to develop the equivalent results on tests of achievement in English.

A final point in favor of early immersion programs which should not be discounted, is the apparent enthusiasm and aptitude which young children demonstrate for language learning. Swain (1979) characterizes this as "feelings of ease, comfort and naturalness in using the second language." In contrast, older students may have had experiences or formed negative attitudes that may jeopardize second language learning. (Genesee, 1984) Since early immersion programs are an integral part of the elementary school day, they do not compete with other activities for prominence.

United States Immersion Programs

As the research information from immersion programs was disseminated, immersion programs spread rapidly in Canada. Immersion programs have also been established in the United States, where a completely different set of realities regarding second language learning exists. United States immersion programs have been established for a variety of reasons, most of which center on a search for alternate approaches to successful second language teaching for young children.

The first United States immersion program was established in Spanish, in Culver City, California, with the help of the University of California, Los Angeles in the fall of 1971. Subsequently, programs were added in Montgomery County, Maryland; Cincinnati, Ohio; San Diego, California; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Orem, Utah; Holliston, Massachusetts; Baton Rouge, Louisiana and Rochester, New York. Most programs are French and Spanish except for Milwaukee and Cincinnati which also have German programs. All of the programs are total immersion except for Cincinnati which has a partial immersion program. (For more information, see Rhodes and Schreibstein, 1983.) Immersion programs in the United States were established either as neighborhood schools with neighborhood school enrollment, or as magnet schools to aid in integration in large urban school districts.

In this paper, there are two examples of what the immersion experience in the United States has been -- Culver City, California and Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The results from the Culver City program are similar to those of the St. Lambert study. The English-speaking students acquire competence in understanding, speaking, reading, and writing in Spanish, while maintaining English language profiency. These students also perform on par with their English-speaking age group in content subjects such as mathematics and science. (Cohen, 1974)

In Milwaukee, the research results are similar to those of Culver City and those from Canada. The Milwaukee Public Schools began with a total immersion program in German in 1977 as part of the integration plan for the city. French was added in 1978 and Spanish in 1980.

The goals of the Milwaukee program are modeled on the goals of the St. Lambert experiment. They state that students who complete the immersion program kindergarten through grade 6 sequence will be able to:

1. Communicate (understand, speak, read and write) in the second language with ability approximating that of a pupil who is native to that language.

2. Perform in English language arts as well as or better than their monolingual peers.

3. Acquire a greater understanding, knowledge and appreciation of other cultures.

4. Achieve such proficiency in the second language and in English that they are able to pursue their studies with ease in both languages.

5. Achieve skills and knowledge in all subject areas equal to or greater than their monolingual peers.

Results from Milwaukee's standardized testing program utilizing the Metropolitan achievement Test and the Iowa Test of Basic Skills have been excellent over the last six years. The results are based on a student population that comes from diverse geographical and socio-economic backgrounds and that has a wide range of intellectual ability. Approximately 40 percent of the students are black, about 10 percent are Spanish surnamed, Native-American, and Asian students. The remaining 50 percent are white. There are no criteria for entrance into the immersion program except for parent interest. Students are randomly selected from extensive waiting lists. This is just a small example of test results which have been consistent over the years with the Canadian research results.

Test results show that Milwaukee's immersion students consistently score well above city-wide and national averages in standardized tests in English Language Arts and Mathematics. For example, in the 1981 grade 3 results from the German program, 100 percent of the pupils scored in the average to above average range on the Metropolitan Achievement Test for Reading (in English) compared to 70 percent for Milwaukee Schools as a whole and 77 percent for norm groups throughout the United States. Similar results were found in mathematics test scores.

The following generalizations apply to the test results of immersion students in Milwaukee: 1) Students in the immersion program are achieving at or above ability level. 2) Students are performing much better than city-wide or national samples on English tests. 3) Student test scores are increasing grade by grade.

The Immersion Approach-Theoretical Foundations and Links to Other Approaches

The final thrust of this paper will be an attempt to tie in immersion methodology with some of the theoretical foundations to which it is linked. In this discussion it is important to remember that the immersion approach is based on the premise that second language learning is similar to first language learning and that people learn a second language in contexts where they are exposed to it in its natural form and where they are socially motivated to communicate. (Lambert, 1984) It is based on the belief that much language learning can occur during the non-language class in much the same way that first language acquisition occurs when children are communicating with others about non-language issues. (Genesee, 1984)

Of all the current theoretical positions held by researchers dealing with second language acquisition, those formulated by Krashen (1981) seem most closely related to the immersion approach. Immersion works because it is comprehensible input with a focus on meaning instead of a focus on form. The fact that there is no formal grammar instruction in the early stages of an immersion program ties in with the idea of acquisition vs. learning. The immersion approach provides an acquisition rich environment for the second language learner. The learner is able to deduce meaning from experiences, from concrete examples and from abundant visual realia found in the immersion classroom (Met, 1983). To use Krashen's terminology "the affective filter is down" in the immersion classroom because anxiety and frustration are easily minimized. Affective variables in an immersion program are high motivation, keen parent interest and the fact that being in an immersion classroom is considered to be a positive enriching experience.

The Natural Approach and the immersion approach have the following factors in common: 1) Just as in the immersion approach, students are allowed to respond in their native language until they are comfortable enough to respond in the target language. 2) The instructor does not correct developmental errors during acquisition activities. In the immersion approach the focus is usually always on errors of fact and not errors of form. Errors of form are usually dealt with in an indirect manner. 3) In the Natural Approach the instructional activities take into account various factors such as, current target language proficiency, age and immediate linguistic needs of the class members. These factors must always be taken into consideration in the immersion classroom.

Terrell believes that the study of a foreign language should include both acquisition and learning activities. Formal language learning activities are not an important feature in the immersion approach and are delayed until the students reach an appropriate developmental level for such activities, just as is done with the monolingual English Language Arts curriculum.

Asher's Total Physical Response Approach (TPR) intersects with the immersion approach in that TPR demands that language be put in a meaningful context. This approach enables students to see the cause and effect relationship between language and human behavior, just as immersion students see on a daily basis in their regular classroom communication. In the immersion approach as in TPR, comprehension precedes production.

The immersion approach and the Lozanov method share the idea that an intensive exposure to a super-saturated learning environment is a key factor in language acquisition. Lozanov (1982) suggests that the most efficient language learning takes place only where the learner is immersed in an environment to which he/she is actively receptive. This certainly takes place in the immersion classroom where the learner is dealing with the complex daily routine of the school environment.

In the Silent Way, just as in the immersion approach, students are offered linguistic situations which are meaningful and can be perceived. In the Counseling Learning approach, as in the immersion approach, alleviating anxiety about the language learning process and making language learning a more natural process is of prime concern.

It would not be difficult to carry this list even further in order to show other obvious relationships between immersion and other approaches. It must be remembered that the immersion approach, especially total immersion, has the advantage of an environment which can conceivably encompass an entire school day with all the myriad opportunities for real, context embedded, meaningful communication that can occur in such an environment.

In conclusion, it is important to note that while there exists a great variety in the types of immersion programs now functioning, and while there are still areas that need to be further investigated, it is apparent that the immersion concept in foreign language education is a sound one. Extensive studies have shown that children benefit from such an approach to second language acquisition, and do not suffer a loss of native language skill development. They not only become functionally proficient in a second language, but also develop average or above-average skills in their native language.

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